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ABSTRACT

The role of incarcerated women's writings as change agents for their communities was explored in a project during which 15 Anglo-American, African-American, and Latina women between the ages of 19 and 40 years voluntarily participates in three 10-week poetry reading and discussion sessions. The program was designed as a Freirian/humanities adult education program and was based on a model for a pilot study with homeless women as a nonthreatening mechanism for addressing personal crises. Before the first session, the women were apprised of the process and requested that Maya Angelou, Patrice Gaines, and Nikki Giovanni serve as "mentors" or role models for their writing. The majority of the women were receptive to the program model of reading, reflecting on, and discussing poetry as a tool for examining their personal identity and values and building a community. The program also had a serendipitous outcome the emergence of a different, activist voice as several of the "repeaters" developed an activist perspective for effecting change within their community, thus confirming theoretical constructs regarding the developing of a confident, meaningful "voice" for social engagement. In interviews, especially, the women exercised extraordinary agency, requesting that their writing be disseminated and maintaining that the alternative, open resistance to the prison system would be personally destructive. (Contains 16 references.) (MN)

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Evolution of Activists: Prison Women's Writings as Change Agent for their Communities

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Abstract: Within the context of a Freirian/humanities adult education program for incarcerated women, 1972 militant women's poetry serendipitously precipitated the emergence of an activist perspective among "repeaters" for effecting change within their community, confirming theoretical constructs regarding the development of a confident, meaningful "voice" for social engagement.

Introduction

From an adult education perspective, since 1994 groups of women at a county jail have explored women's literature as a medium for understanding and addressing the crises that inhibit their self-actualization. Subsequent creative expression reinforces the reflection and discussion, thereby shattering "the culture of silence" (Freire, 1995) of these oppressed women and empowering them through the use of their own words (Baird, 1997). In addition to an acknowledged oral history tradition among African Americans, black feminist scholars such as Hill Collins (1997) have underscored the need for and efficacy of sharing personal histories to authenticate and, according to hooks (1994, p. 452), to provide "a firm grounding in self and identity." Current studies within higher education and the medical community also focus on the power of narratives, theirs as a healing dimension (Anderson & MacCurdy, 1997). Given this increasing and varied interest in the writing process, the original intent was to examine the outcomes of the Freirian/humanities-oriented program for incarcerated women in which self-expression was an integral, significant aspect of identity formation. Participation was voluntary; five of the women were frequent "residents" of the jail and always involved themselves in the program. They claimed that the learning model was effective for continuing to work through deep-seated problems. As the program evolved, however, influenced by Giovanni's activist poetry (1972) these five chose to redirect their attention from the personal identity formation dialogue of the group to community identity perspectives. As a result, a creative social activist voice emerged that defined their community, with the purpose of generating healthy change. This serendipitous outcome, therefore, became the purpose of the study.

Methodology

Fifteen Anglo-, African-American and Latina women, between the ages of 19 and 40, volunteered to participate in a series of three ten-week sessions, with each meeting lasting 90 minutes. The process was based on a model created for a pilot study with homeless women as a non-threatening mechanism for addressing personal crises (Baird, 1997, 1994). Drawing on the aspect of the humanities that stresses cognitive skills for examining personal identity, values and community building, the model involved reading, reflection and discussion of poetry and prose

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selections of successful female authors of similar race, class and experience as a method for understanding and addressing their own traumas. The women were appraised beforehand of the process which incorporated creative expression on issues relevant to each one. As a result, they requested authors they chose to serve as "mentors," as role models for their writing. Maya Angelou, Patrice Gaines and Nikki Giovanni were the authors of choice. At the culmination of a ten-week segment, the women selected their favorite writing samples for inclusion in their book as tangible evidence of identity, esteem and empowerment building. Data gathered during the course of the study included annotated observations of the class interaction, written and oral evaluations and an analysis of the women's writing for thematic constructs.

Theory

This study was framed in the context of the oppressive conditions and status of incarcerated women. They are defined as a disturbing statistic and classified by a prison number. Recognized feminist corrections research chronicles the race, class and gender factors that form the basis of the stigma and marginalization (Belknap, 1996; Owen, 1998; Watterson, 1996). Chesney-Lind's work (1997) especially focuses on the societal attitudes and policy that contribute to the potential for girls to become offenders. This research also confirms some adult education perspectives on the education and marginalization of incarcerated women (Baird, 2001).

Given this context, Freirian theory was the most appropriate lens through which to analyze the outcomes. As a learning issue, it supported the humanities orientation of exercising cognitive skills to address identity, values and community building. Its precise focus, however, was on the issue of oppression. Succinctly, Freire's commitment was to provide illiterate peasants, *objects* of oppression, with a process for humanization, empowerment and liberation. It evolved from the lowest "intransitive, *object*" stage, the "culture of silence" and self-blame level, to the highest "transitive, *subject*" stage of self-confidence and a sense of responsibility. Inherent was the acquisition of a voice, a vocabulary of the learners' words to identify themselves, their status and to take action, to face the oppressor.

Black feminist theory, especially the work of Hill Collins (1997), echoed the same necessity for taking responsibility for identity formation and socialization for liberation. She reinforced this theory, quoting bell hooks (as cited in Hill Collins, 1997), "Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as *subjects* . . . by shaping their identity, naming their history, telling their story. Because self-definition is key to individual and group empowerment . . . ce[ding] this to other groups . . . in essence perpetuates black women's subordination (p. 254)". This is especially significant given the fact that the five "emerging activists" were African-American.

Findings

The majority of the women, in their writing and discussion, were receptive to the model. The following responses were similar to and consistent with previous outcomes regarding identity formation:

You can just imagine all kinds of personalities that you are open to collect
You will struggle with yourself to figure out what your purpose truly can be
if you are not clear about yourself
your life will be chaotic and a continuing search for help.

Another reflected:

I am a mere image of my former self
I take inventory and find nothing on the shelf
I have a future I need to make last
I must see another day, another way

The serendipitous outcome, however, was the emergence of a different, an activist voice. The following excerpts are an appropriate introduction to this new direction and its influences:

Nikki Giovanni taught me never to give up
while Maya Angelou taught me to never shut up.
. . .
While Nikki Giovanni encouraged me to stick and stay
Two highly critically acclaimed poets
I want to follow in their footsteps wouldn't you know it
Maya Angelou said "I'm the Reason Why the Caged Bird Sings"
and Nikki Giovanni said "CHANGE SOME THINGS!"

Though written independently from the other four women's creative input, this signaled a turning point from reflections during previous periods of incarceration and program participation. This time it was Giovanni's 1972 militant poetry that resonated for them. Their own writing, in contrast, however, turned into messages to their community, using the "safety net" of literature to teach, to help, to discourage a cycle of incarceration.

One woman, in particular, was amassing a collection entitled "Bitter Sweet." Her preface reads:

A. seeks to reach out to the Black Community to rebuild what she helped to tear down and to encourage others . . . A. has experienced growing up in a dysfunctional family, teen-age pregnancy, rape, brutal domestic violence, a heroin, cocaine and crack cocaine addition, and has spent the majority of her adult life incarcerated in some form or another . . . [her poetry] reflects on her past, her present, and her hopes and dreams for a brighter tomorrow.

Space limitations prevent sharing complete selections. Because it is essential to read the women's own words, the following excerpts are examples of how they identified with their own communities:

Open Your Eyes

Black people wake up and open your eyes,
it isn't our race that you should hate and despise.
Black people look around you, tell me what you see,
is it drugs plaguing and destroying communities.
Black people do you ask why our young black youth commit so many crimes,
are we guilty of not instilling positive images into their minds.
Black people unite, let us build up and not tear down,
let us come together and turn our lives and our children's lives around.
Black people we must educate our uneducated; preach and teach;
praying that our youths are not lost, and totally out of our reach.
Black people wake up and open your eyes
before it's <u>your</u> black baby next, who dies.

B. reflected that Giovanni's "We" influenced "Those Nights."

We	Those Nights
we stood there waiting	Restless nights
. . .	can't sleep for the shootings and fights,
watching to see if	drunkards staggering through the streets
hope would come by	while city cops walk the best
we stood there hearing	hearing the baby crying from downstairs
the sound of police sirens	she has a mother that doesn't care
and fire engines	I remember being "out there"
the explosions	the pain in my life was too much to bear
and babies crying	as I look down on the city's sights
we listened	I see the pestilence and remember those perilous nights
. . .	Another restless night
hearts shutting	can I stand up and fight?
the bodies sweating	to help my sisters and my brothers
we are seeing the revolution	praying just to help another
screeeeeeeeeeeching	the baby that was crying downstairs
to a halt trying to find a	here I sit rocking her and shedding my tears
clever way	the city's still blinking it's neon lights
to be empty	how many more will die tonight?
[2 feb 70]	

Two of the women spoke to their "sistahs [sic] and brothers" about resolving conflict without violence. N., who now comfortably describes herself as a "regular cat," chronicled in detail – name, place, date – the fate of 41 people she knew who were destroyed by AIDS, drugs and street violence . . . their epitaph. Finally, reflections about the "hood":

In My Hood

Life in my hood isn't always sweet,
step up on my stoop and take a seat.
Look around with your eyes opened wide
In this neighborhood who takes pride?
. . .
There are a few of us who really do care.
Life in my hood is always sweet
let's pull together to conquer and defeat!

In the interviews, especially, the women exercised extraordinary agency, requesting the dissemination of their writing. They maintained that the alternative, open resistance to the prison system, would be personally destructive, on the inside and the outside. They were not familiar with Freirian or black feminist theory. Theoretically, however, they validated the Freirian perspective (1995) of moving from a "culture of silence," of being "object" in their earlier writing, to a level of self-confidence, of using words that held meaning for them to assume responsibility for their communities by trying to humanize and liberate them. In essence, their use of literature was a way of reinforcing hooks' (1994) admonition of "choosing 'wellness' [for their community] as a form of political resistance."

Implications and Conclusions

Because six years of learning with, from and about incarcerated women with their deeply-rooted problems, exacerbated by drugs and lack of community support and resources, questions arose regarding the outcomes in spite of the stunning correspondence with theory. Among the incarcerated, often there is fear of change and lack of trust as a result of their real-life experiences. During an interview, one woman said, "I could change the world if I could change myself." Only five, all repeaters in the program, felt comfortable doing so. The question that remained unanswered, therefore, was whether the new direction of the "activists" was the result of their having evolved and defined themselves and their role in their communities to the extent that they achieved the Freirian "self-confident stage" for assuming responsibility as change agents. Or, as has been attributed to Giovanni's militancy, was the activist voice still a personal "revolution," a gesture that heals? The strongest implication is that this limited research needs to be repeated, especially if, as adult educators, we are to develop and take to the oppressed programs that support them in their achievement of humanization, empowerment and liberation.

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